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ABSTRACT

This serial issue deals with how to integrate a whole language approach in secondary schools. Following a short outline of the differences between whole language principles and skills-based precepts, key tenets of whole language are briefly discussed. The next section of the issue deals with principal-teacher partnerships, and these are followed by brief descriptions (under the school name and address) of three secondary school teachers who use whole language in their English classes. A short summary concludes the issue. (SR)

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# Integrating a Whole Language Approach in Secondary Schools

*Language instruction has changed over the years. In the past, classroom teachers geared their energies toward skills-based reading and writing. Today's philosophy incorporates developmental learning, oral language, reading, writing, and evaluation—whole language.*

Differences between past and present classroom practices reflect the changing philosophy of how children learn, which instructional materials are incorporated, and what teaching strategies and assessment measures are used.

More important, the whole language learning approach allows varied interpretations regarding the roles of the student and the teacher.

Fundamental whole language principles differ from skill-based precepts in several ways:

- Whole language proponents believe students naturally acquire language from various stimuli rather than through direct instruction in the classroom.
- Language is regarded as integrated rather than fragmented.
- Students learn actively by talking, doing, experimenting, and the like, rather than passively (listening and acknowledging).
- Students learn to read and write by expanding their potential through literature-based experiences rather than isolated workbook drills and practice.
- Students achieve more in interactive problem-solving enterprises than in individual task-oriented isolation.

Obviously, a meld of effective teaching, appropriate materials, equitable evaluation techniques, pertinent curricular emphases, and a conducive learning environment are integral to whole language teaching and learning.

Key tenets of whole language include:

- quisition of language as an interactive process
- Oral language development as part of the classroom
- A literature-based curriculum
- Writing
- Curriculum integration
- Student-centered teaching and learning
- Multiple student grouping
- Self-esteem promotion
- Emphasis on critical thinking.

**Language acquisition as an interactive process.** Whole language teachers believe language is acquired through a complex, interactive, social process that is not restricted to particular forms, but includes diverse opportunities for student expression.

Enhancing classroom activities includes such strategies as listening to and reading unabridged stories; orally retelling tales; writing comprehensive stories; interpreting and discussing thoughts, feelings, and reactions; and participating in music, creative arts, drama, writing, and investigation.

**Oral language development.** Oral language development in whole language settings is encouraged through dictation of personal stories; cooperative learning through discussions; and participation in interdisciplinary activities (other subject areas).

**Literature-based curriculum.** An integral component of whole language rests in a literature-based curriculum.

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This inclusion reaffirms the conviction that literature is the basis for language learning by offering the greatest potential for student achievement; sharing high quality, stimulating stories written in rich language; providing multiple listening objective opportunities; encouraging desire for personal reading; and stimulating involvement in creative writing, art, and drama.

**Emphasis on writing.** Another tenet of whole language involves an emphasis on writing. Writing experiences are encouraged and incorporated by providing a variety of purposes; facilitating numerous interests; encouraging different structures, such as retelling, dictated stories, invented spellings, drawings, letters, etc.; and including critical evaluation of work, draft revision, editing, and publication of written compositions.

**Curriculum integration.** Curriculum integration is an important aspect of whole language teaching and learning. First and foremost, whole language classrooms respond to student needs through interdisciplinary means across the curriculum. Opportunities include experiences in complex language processes through engagement in real-life situations; integration and interrelation of the basic language art—listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and incorporation of the visual arts, drama, and other content ares, such as science, mathematics, music, philosophy, and the social sciences.

**Student-centered teaching.** Student-centered teaching and learning is another characteristic of the whole language philosophy. In the classroom, teaching strategies are based on the great expanse of knowledge students bring to school.

These educational underpinnings are developed to encourage active involvement by both teachers and students; facilitate educational ventures based on realistic student data; and meet the needs and interests of individual students while allowing for personal progress rates.

**Multiple student grouping.** Whole language teaching and learning is further characterized by multiple student grouping. The whole language approach often encourages and involves diverse groupings: whole class, individualized learning situations, and small groups.

**Promotion of self-esteem.** Essential to the whole language philosophy is the promotion of self-esteem. Whole language curriculum strives to develop personal high standards and a feeling of self-worth in terms of language competency, capability, effectiveness, and knowledge.

**Critical thinking.** Another key issue is the emphasis on critical thinking skills. Whole language programs strive to develop higher order critical thinking skills by producing experiences that challenge students to think, hypothesize, generalize, experiment, and evaluate their developing language skills; critically evaluate their reading and writing skills; understand and adapt to their changing language growth; and comprehend and assess personal achievements.

Metacognition is an indisputable girder of whole language teaching and learning.

Some of the components of the whole language learning approach dramatically break from traditional patterns. For example, rigid three-level reading groups no longer exist, for students tend to be more engaged in either individual or whole class instruction.

Small groups, clustered according to ability, have no role in the whole language classroom; cooperative learning groups take priority. Such groups encourage individual autonomy, facilitate task force endeavors, and create new formats for literacy experiences (California Department of Education, 1987).

## Principal-Teacher Partnerships

Whole language advocates suggest that educators become reflective teachers—thinking about, evaluating, and adapting their teaching to meet student needs. Teachers must recognize that the learning environment reflects a similar setting. Such a climate encourages teachers to experiment and create, provide support, encourage reflection, solve problems, and promote sharing. This climate, in essence, is the same type of atmosphere found in excellent schools.

Principals must encourage teachers to experiment with the whole-language approach. Even more important is the principal's willingness to work with teachers to become whole language advocates. This partnership is crucial to the success of the reading program.

Together, teachers and administrators may:

- Participate in regularly-scheduled discussion sessions dealing with research and theory
- Evaluate the school's reading program
- Propose different reading curriculum materials to replace basal readers, workbooks, skill sheets, etc.
- Share professional literature supporting the whole language approach
- Strive for ownership in deciding instructional programs by presenting and discussing instructional strategies, problem resolution, and program modification with peers
- Share thoughts, concerns, and ideas with other staff members, faculty, and administration
- Present potentially workable solutions to special education faculty members
- Share the efficacy of particular instructional units and action research with staff members
- Include consultants in presentations
- Request technical support (district or administrative).

A holistic approach to introducing students to literacy is the primary objective. Language without meaning has no meaning. Written words without purpose have no intent. Oral retelling without understanding has no impact.

Several innovative schools have incorporated whole language into their curriculum. For instance, in one rural New Hampshire district, classrooms are inundated with all types of children's literature. Here, students read any and every book of personal interest and "whole language instruction and writing processes bridge each child's curiosity and life experiences to language and books." (Robbins, 1990). Students read books that interest them, write stories that excite them, draw supporting illustrations, and evaluate their work through peer conferences (Calkins, 1986; Flemming, 1988).

Clearly, reading and writing are integrated processes. Writing furthers an enthusiasm for reading, and reading generates reciprocal writing. Story writing involves thought organization and subsequent analysis. Whole class discussion and response provides for reflection and contextual modification.

In addition, overwhelming teacher support of the reading and writing connection due to escalating student achievement data (Goodman, 1986) not only reaffirms the potential of whole language learning and teaching, but also suggests whole-school program implementation if the approach is to have genuine value to the entire student population.

What type of support is essential for the success of a whole language curriculum?

First, administrative support is clearly required (Goodman, 1986). And, teacher-consultants must be readily available to those who implement such a program (Flemming, 1988). Whole language reading and writing cannot succeed if only a few teachers implement the program.

Follow-up is also essential. Whole language assistants can assess strengths and options, evaluate weaknesses, suggest various demonstrations, model team teaching, schedule group presentations, and conduct faculty meetings, courses, or mini-workshops.

Such consultants not only help diagnose student needs and suggest appropriate strategies to meet those needs, but also build a climate of trust between and among teachers. This is the foundation for growth and change.

With respect to assessing student achievement, alternative evaluation procedures consistent with the whole language philosophy must be implemented (Johnston, 1987). Student behaviors while reading, writing, listening, and speaking may be key indicators of achievement (Clay, 1979). Assessment may also involve checklists, language behavior inventories, anecdotal records, reading logs, work samples, and attitude inventories (Teale, Hiebert, and Chittenden, 1987).

## Exempli Gratia

HILTON CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
400 East Ave., Hilton, New York 14468
George Goodwin, principal
Contact person: Ed Scutt, teacher/consultant
(716) 392-4940.

Ed Scutt has been using whole language in his English classes at Hilton (1,000 students) for the past three years. He decided to try whole language in 1988 after reading Nancie Atwell and hearing David Booth. In his classes, Scutt uses a variety of instructional whole language strategies: reader response journal, writer's notebook, writer's workshop, and student choice of topics and titles.

His students show more care in writing for publication, a "dizzying" array of writing content and styles, more genuine engagement in literature studies, more risk taking and sharing, and more of a sense of community about learning.

Scutt receives positive yearly evaluations from his administrators and students. Two other teachers in his school are using whole language, and others are interested.

EARL MARRIOTT SECONDARY SCHOOL
15751 15th Ave., Surrey, British Columbia V4A 1S1.
Gerry Poulik, principal
Contact person: Heinz Senger, teacher

Earl Marriott enrolls 1,600 students in grades 8-12. Heinz Senger has been a whole language teacher since 1969. He says he has always been a follower of Aristotle and Plato and therefore believes that all teachers should be interested in connecting language to the students' experiences and connecting them to literature.

Senger's students are actively involved in his English classes. They attend class regularly, become involved, and stay in school. They are empowered by the knowledge and feeling that their experiences count and are validated in class.

Most of the English teachers at Earl Marriott are whole language teachers; they receive administrative support via money and time. The most valuable administrative support, according to Senger, is time and smaller classes, which are the most important elements in whole language classes.

DANVILLE HIGH SCHOOL
202 E. Fairchild, Danville, Illinois 61832
Dr. Ellen Russell, principal
Contact person: Garnet A. Nixon, teacher

Garnet Nixon, a whole language teacher for 10 years, teaches in the same way she learns. This teaching philosophy has led her to whole language books and workshops.

She regularly uses thematic studies, multiple texts, student-generated lessons, student participation in holistic evaluation, interdisciplinary reading, and sharing of independent reading. She has noticed an increase in student interest, an increase of student ownership of class assignments, and more effort.

The administration has been very supportive by providing staff development and additional materials and texts.

## In Summary

Whole language denotes a complete, integrated philosophy and corresponding knowledge base that helps teachers make countless professional decisions. Whole language also exemplifies the establishment of a rich, authentic, and developmentally appropriate classroom experience.

In addition, whole language includes provision of resources, promotion of holistic teaching, and alternative assessment. It means a commitment to providing students, regardless of ability, language, or physical limitations with challenging and appropriate instruction.

Finally, whole language involves a variety of culturally-rich and meaningful social experiences that bring teaching and learning together in a unique way.

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### KUDOS

This *Curriculum Report* was written by Mary Ellen Varble and Veronica Stephen, both assistant professors at Eastern Illinois University. Varble has taught in public schools in Michigan, Kansas, and Arkansas. Stephen is a former junior high school principal. Both spend considerable time training teachers to use the whole-language method.


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